DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 227 219 CE 033 032

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TITLE Communicative Competence and Lifelong Learning.
PUB DATE [81]
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Education; *Adult Educators; Adults; Communication Skills; *Communicative Competence (Languages); *Interpersonal Communication; *Lifelong Learning; Older Adults; *Speech Communication

ABSTRACT

Designed for both experienced and novice adult educators who want to improve their own communication and that of their students, this essay presents information on communicative competence and its importance for lifelong learning. First, communicative competence is defined as the ability of persons to be adaptive, flexible, and sensitive to the demands of other persons and of different situational contexts. The essay next applies three principles of competence to processes of lifelong learning: (1) the ability to formulate and achieve objectives; (2) the ability to collaborate effectively with others, i.e., to be interdependent; and (3) the ability to adapt appropriately to situational and environmental variations. Finally, the benefits of effective communication for the teaching and learning of adults are described. Problems due to the lack of competence and benefits resulting from the presence of competence are identified for each part of a basic communication model. (YLB)

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ED227219

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AND LIFELONG LEARNING

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Dr. Schuetz has recently completed a funded project teaching communication skills to the institutionalized elderly. She serves as a member of the New Mexico Aging Coalition, Albuquerque Aging Coalition, Speech Communication Association Caucus on Aging, and the Gerontology Committee at the University of New Mexico. This paper is extracted from an essay she presented at a recent symposium entitled "Humanities and Aging Studies" at the University of Missouri-Rolla.

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AND LIFELONG LEARNING

The term "communication" is the God-Word for our times. Not only are the problems of communication associated with most human and social issues, but the resolving of those problems is often attributed to the effectiveness of communication. As a result, the word "communication" has magical connotations. The magical formula reads something like this: If only persons could improve their communication, then most personal, social, political, and even, international problems would be solved. This faith in the magic of effective communication extends to proposals and innovations for the education of adults. In her report for the American Association for Higher Education, Josephs advocates competency-based instruction for adults embodying these skills of communication: "values clarification, decision-making, problem-solving, group interaction, critical thinking or analysis."[1] Furthermore, she contends that these competencies in communication are essential for both institutional programs and educators who seek to serve the needs of older learners.

Most educators recognize that effective communication has an <u>actual</u> rather than just a <u>magical</u> impact on teaching and learning. Since educators of adults have had to adjust to a variety of situations, work with the diverse needs of learners, and develop non-traditional subject-matter, many of them have already developed skills associated with competence in communication. This essay is designed for both experienced and novice educators of adults who want to improve their own communication and that of their students. In approaching this goal, the essay (1) explains communicative competence, (2) applies these principles to processes of lifelong learning, and (3) describes the benefits of effective communication for the teaching and the learning of adults.

What is Communicative Competence?

The principle of communicative competence assumes that a person's ability to communicate effectively improves social functioning and enhances personal growth. Various definitions of competence collectively describe the principle as the ability of persons to interact effectively with others, which depends on their skills in taking the perspective of other persons in the communicative exchange, defining and adapting to a variety of situational contexts and formulating and enacting goals that are designed for diverse contexts.[2] In short then, the competent communicator is someone who is adaptive, flexible, and sensitive to the demands of other persons and of different situational contexts.

Obviously, physical and mental impairments limit a person's ability to communicate competently. Some degree of good health, intelligence, empathy, autonomy, judgment, and creativity are needed for teachers and learners to maximize their competence in communication. As a result, it is unrealistic to assume that all adult learners regardless of circumstance can practice the ideals of communicative competence. However, it <u>is</u> realistic to assume that when teachers possess these attributes they increase their capability for dealing with a wide variety of learners and educational contexts. In completing a recent project with lifelong learning and institutionalized persons over eighty years of age, I found that both learning and enjoyment of learning occur when instructors practice the sensitivity and flexibility associated with communicative competence.[3]

How Does Communicative Competence Affect Lifelong Learning?

Lifelong learning stresses learning for the sake of learning rather than taking coursework for grades, credit, or certification. This type of learning occurs throughout the life cycle and is often identified with personal reflection and insight gained from experience rather than formal instructional

programs and outcomes. In its broad definition, lifelong learning concerns communication and the questioning of experiences and values a person learns throughout a lifetime. Lifelong learning differs from adult education in general since it is not concerned with instructional programs per se. Instead, lifelong learning is a reciprocal and complex pedagogical process involving learning from older persons, teaching them, using them as teachers, facilitating peer learning among older adults, and utilizing older learners as educational resources within the community. In sum then, lifelong learning is personal, innovative, and useful.

The list below offers general guidelines for educators who wish to include older persons in their teaching, learning, and research.

1. Assist older learners in becoming aware of their own experiences through dialogues, classes, workshops, and seminars.
2. Involve our own high school and university students in the learning process of older persons by encouraging them to do interviews, oral histories, and research for their own coursework.
3. Solicit older persons as lecturers, panelists, and discussion leaders to comment on subject matter from their perspective.
4. Invite older persons from your own disciplines to participate in conventions, in forums, and in editorial work for journals.
5. Sponsor seminars or discussions in which the topic of aging and your discipline can be discussed jointly by older persons, students, and faculty.
6. Encourage our colleges and universities to institute reduced tuition programs for older learners who wish to study on campus.
7. Offer educational programs through alternative delivery systems such as through Senior Centers, churches, museums, retirement homes, and hospitals.

The suggestions listed above typify the wide range of situations available to programs of lifelong learning. The success of these learning processes increases when practitioners and learners practice competent communication. More specifically, three principles of competence relate directly to processes of lifelong learning. These include: "(1) ability to formulate and achieve objectives; (2) ability to collaborate effectively with others, i.e., to be interdependent; and (3) ability to adapt appropriately to situational and environmental variations."[4]

First, practitioners need to formulate and achieve objectives by establishing definitive research and pedagogical goals and plans of communication for carrying out these goals. For example, teachers should decide how to inform learners about subject matter, decide upon issues for discussion, consider strategies for involving students, and determine methods for sharing and disseminating information associated with the learning goals. Researchers should define their objectives and determine a communicative plan for achieving these objectives such as phrasing and ordering questions, deciding on ways of securing the data they are seeking, and informing subjects about the purpose and use of the data.

Learners also need goals for themselves. While practitioners can assist learners in specifying these goals through formal techniques of value clarification and through informal discussion and assessment, learners still need to establish personal goals. Learners should make a commitment to give time and to engage in sharing. Perhaps the best option is for practitioners and learners to participate jointly in the framing of these goals. For example, I approach learners by asking them what they know about the content, how they see the content affecting them, and what their problems or questions are about the content. Their responses serve as the basis for the goals of learning.

Second, an understanding of and an ability for collaboration aids the success of the learning process. Collaboration means an attitude of joint participation--working with ideas, issues, options. Practitioners need to consider themselves as co-learners, and learners need to recognize that each person has equally valid opinions and experiences. Effective communication involves giving messages and accepting and respecting the messages of others. Practitioners can establish a model for this kind of collaborative communication by asking questions, using clarification, listening empathically, giving frequent and appropriate feedback, encouraging learners to take turns at responding and talking, discouraging interruptions, and participating fully themselves in the communicative exchange.

In working with institutionalized old persons, I found that old persons often have difficulty focusing on the topic, may talk too long, and may interrupt frequently. Practitioners can guide the communicative interaction by their own collaborative behavior. When older learners are healthy and alert, they practice collaboration with very little assistance. Collaboration is as important for researchers as it is for teachers. For example, persons conducting interviews, collecting data, or doing oral history should guide respondents and yet be willing and able to ask questions, comment, interact, and direct the focus of the communication.

Finally, the practice of communicative competence in lifelong learning should encourage appropriate adaptation of both practitioners and learners to a wide variety of contexts. Adapting to situational differences may require altering one's traditional teaching or research formats to accommodate for a slower pace of excharging information, scheduling longer periods for interactions, accounting for extra time needed to establish relationships with learners. The format for learning may involve working as a team, engaging in dialogue,

using discussion, or primarily being a listener. Those involved in lifelong learning know that much learning occurs outside of the traditional classroom or laboratory and should be able to adapt to different settings. Practitioners can better adapt to older learners if they have general knowledge about the problems and promises of aging.

Oftentimes, social rituals will emerge as part of the learning situation. Practitioners should expect to have a snack and/or to engage in chit-chat before they enter into their learning process. Learners need to understand the norms of the learning situation and how they are expected to act. Both practitioners and learners should be flexible with the time of the learning projects. Some sessions may be quite long, and others might be short depending on the interests and energy of the learners. Whatever the case, the goals can be attained more effectively if practitioners and learners are competent in their ability to adapt to a variety of situations.

A certain degree of communicative competence is necessary for everyone who participates in lifelong learning programs. By developing competence to formulate objectives, engage in collaboration, and adapt to situations, practitioners can develop appropriate strategies for clarifying values, investigating traditions, and understanding relationships of older persons. Without this competence, practitioners may approach adult learners as objects of study or teaching and in doing so fail to benefit from personal interaction with older persons. With competence, both learners and practitioners can participate in a mutually educational and humanizing process that will permit them to experience the promise and address the problems of growing older.

What Benefits Result from Competent Communication?

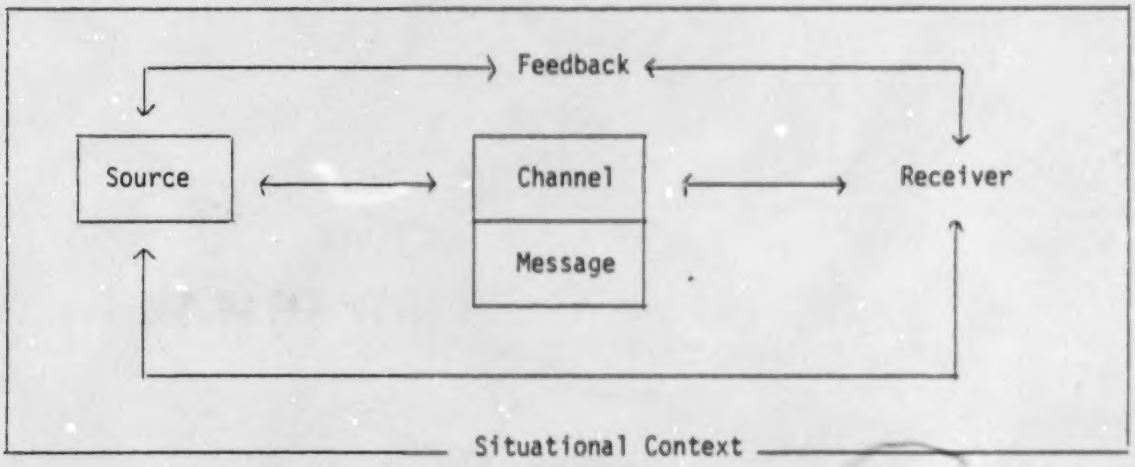
Research studies conclude that the circumstances of growing older create communication problems. Among the causes of these problems are retirement,

isolation, physical disabilities, lack of transportation, separation from family, changing residences, and lack of knowledge about channels of communication. These circumstances create problems because they impede, distort, or complicate the ability of older persons to communicate as effectively and easily as they once did.

A basic communication model consists of a source which refers to the sender of the message; a message which involves language, structure, content, and relationship; channels which include medium through which messages are sent such as by mail, phone, newspaper; receivers which are the recipients of the messages or the communication; situational contexts which includes where and when the message is sent as well as number of persons and location of the communication; and feedback which is the verbal reaction to the message.

This basic model assumes that each part of the model affects each other in a mutual-causal manner, so source affects and is affected by receiver, context, channels, feedback, and situation. All variables are affected by all others.

Communication Model



This model can be useful in classifying problems that may be associated with adult learners.[5] In the first column, the listing of problems offers challenges to teachers who instruct older persons, particularly those over-65. The second column specifies benefits that should result when competent communication is modeled by teachers and used as instructional goals for learners.

	Lack of Competence--Problems	Presence of Competence--Benefits
SOURCE	lacks knowledge has psychological and physical impairments has dogmatic opinions has outdated values	promotes new knowledge learns how to compensate for impairments creates ability to listen to others becomes aware of values of others
CHANNEL	makes incorrect choice of channel for message lacks available channels	learns how to use channels for different types of messages provides channels for interaction
MESSAGE	lacks clarity in message lacks interaction skills is unfamiliar with new codes	learns how to be more clear learns turn-taking and clarification learns new codes and when to use them
FEEDBACK	uses poor listening habits uses inappropriate feedback	learns ways for active listening learns ways to make feedback more clear and appropriate
RECEIVER	lacks understanding of source lacks understanding of verbal code	learns role-taking strategies learns questioning strategies
SITUATION	inability to adapt to a large variety of situations lacks knowledge about contextual rules for communication	provides various situations for communication learns how situations require different types of communication

If those involved in lifelong learning are aware of some of the problems with communication and know how to modify these problems through competence in communication, they can promote understanding between persons, enhance the learning process, and realize the magic of effective communication.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Mary Jim Josephs, "Adapting Institutions to the Adult Learner: Experiments in Progress," in Current Issues in Higher Education (Washington, D. C.: American Association for Higher Education, 1978), p. 12.

[2]Two sources develop the principles of communicative competence: Arthur P. Bochner and Clifford W. Kelly, "Interpersonal Competence: Rationale, Philosophy and Implementation of a Conceptual Framework," The Speech Teacher, 23 (November 1974), pp. 279-301; and David L. Swanson and Jesse G. Delia, The Nature of Human Communication (Chicago: Science Research Associates, 1976), pp. 28-35.

[3]Janice Schuetz, "Lifelong Learning: Communication Education for the Elderly," Communication Education, 29 (January 1980), 33-41.

[4]Bochner and Kelly, 288.

[5]Herbert J. Oyer and E. Jane Oyer, "Communicating with Older People: Basic Considerations" in Communication and Aging, Oyer and Oyer, eds. (Baltimore: University Park, 1976).